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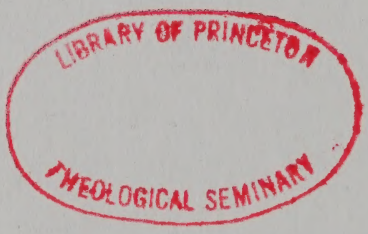

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Ways of praying

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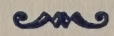
WAYS OF PRAYING

By
MURIEL LESTER



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INTRODUCTION

"How much time ought we to spend in prayer?"

"Enough time to forget time," answered a wise woman.

"Then I can't pray, for from early morning till late at night I am hard at work. I can't get away apart, alone."

It is for you who answer like this, indeed for the majority of Christians, that these pages are written. Anyone can live the life of prayer. It is not long periods of quiet and leisure that are the great necessity in prayer; it is a habit, an humble spirit; a disciplined mind, a sense of order, self-control, an intelligent associating of ideas. And all these you can acquire while you dress, bath, brush your hair, walk to work, or sit in the bus.

Spiritual gifts are useless and may even become corrupt if not applied to the ordinary happenings of everyday life. Everyone must win his own soul. It is not a job that can be done for you; yet, if it is not done, you will never be master of your own life. Unless you can evolve a working philosophy of some sort, unless you can fit the joys and pains, the hopes and struggles, the beauties and the failures of your daily life into some large framework of meaning; unless you can get a sense of unity, of completeness, you are at the mercy of whim and circumstance.

These notes, then, are intended as a guide to those who want to pray. Do not be discouraged by difficulties. Prayer, like any other art which aims at the attainment of perfection, persistently demands your best, and no province of your daily life can be outside it.

CONTENTS

		PAGE
	INTRODUCTION	3
I.	THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER	5
II.	THE FIRST WAKING THOUGHT	7
III.	THE MORNING PRAYER	11
IV.	ACTS OF RECOLLECTION	15
V.	THE PRAYER OF RELAXATION	20
VI.	INTERCESSORY PRAYER	24
VII.	THE EVENING PRAYER	30

WAYS OF PRAYING

I

THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER

"I NEED no idea of a God to lean upon, and I wonder that you do. I concede that such may be necessary to some rather weak-minded people, but not to me, personally."

Variations of this statement are constantly being made by people of fine character. People who hold this viewpoint seem to take it for granted that Christians have the unpleasant habit of needing to lean on something. The tired tramp holding up the public-house wall, the effete youth lounging his life away on the Riviera must lean. The words "Lean heavily" sung in a passionate undertone in one of the *fin de siècle* ballads had tremendous emotional effect, but I doubt whether many of us would describe our religion as leaning on God.

On the contrary, contact with God makes for independence of spirit; it lessens a person's timorous qualms, rids him of worry, and, giving him tolerance and courage, drives him into action, unconcerned as to what people say or think about him.

However, there may be fortunate individuals who in their nature possess all these good gifts that most of us only gain from prayer and the strenuous attempt to follow Christ. Probably they had excellent parents, their ancestors were of good stock, their home life was happy, they had a sensible upbringing, were neither rich nor poor, and were early made to consider the rights of others and the wrongs of the dispossessed. When adolescence, with

its baffling conflicts, came upon them, they had wise older friends to guide them through its stormy period; when sex first got its powerful grip on them, there was no wreckage in their lives.

Such as they might easily feel no need of God. Actually they need God tremendously so that all their natural, inherited, and acquired gifts may be co-ordinated, and they may fulfil their destiny and become natural leaders, saviors of their generation.

Any person thus richly endowed is failing the rest of us if he is not fulfilling his function of setting up the way of salvation for the oppressed, the downtrodden, and the dispossessed.

"I will accept no privilege that others cannot have the counterpart of, on the same terms," asserted Eugene Debs, the American. Fortunately nurtured individuals inherit countless privileges of which others are dispossessed. Redress is needed.

John Wesley said, "The world is my parish." The parish priest of the world has no time to waste in arguing about religion; he is knitting up a brotherhood that shall confuse the warmongers; he is abolishing poverty and riches; he is creating imperishable beauty wherever he goes; he is redeeming mankind from the curse; he is establishing the Kingdom of Heaven.

Come down from your pedestal. Join us of common clay, who are conscious of our need of help to keep from sin and crime. We look to God and our neighbor to provide it.

II

THE FIRST WAKING THOUGHT

IMMEDIATELY you awake set your first thought on God. Keep your mind on him for a few seconds.

Do not think of him subjectively, as to your relation to him, your failures, your sins, or your needs, but rather objectively. Let your whole self become conscious of him. Think of him as shining beauty, radiant joy, creative power, all-pervading love, perfect understanding, purity, and serenity. This need only take a moment or two once the habit has been formed, but it is of inestimable importance. It sets the tone for the whole day.

Even if one is awakened by the peremptory shout of a raucous voice, or the nerve-shattering rattle of an alarm clock, the real Presence can be apprehended almost instantaneously.

One's waking mood tends to correspond to the state of mind in which one falls asleep. If, therefore, as a result of a disturbed night or simply because of lack of practice, this first thought of God should evade you, look out of the window for something obviously made by him, trees, flowers, the sky, or a wind-shaped cloud, even a gray one, and ponder on the perfection of his handicraft.

Perhaps you are living in an overcrowded home, without fresh air, entirely divorced from nature, deprived of the natural means by which God manifests himself to his people, so that from your narrow window you cannot even see the sky for smoke. If so, let your thoughts rest on a beautiful picture. But if all outside aids are denied you, a memory will suffice, a picture in your mind, or the recollection of a cool breeze you have once felt on your brow.

My heart is resting, O my God;
I will give thanks and sing;
My heart is at the secret source
Of every precious thing.
Now the frail vessel thou has made
No hand but thine shall fill;
For the waters of the earth have failed,
And I am thirsting still.
—*Anna L. Waring.*

If unpleasant memories press in upon you so that you cannot fasten your mind on him, do not worry about it. Laugh at yourself and think, "What a good thing God does not look at me as I look at myself! He sees something thoroughly lovable in me. He thinks of me as a potent sort of person, and is expecting something rather great and fine to work itself out through my life, and is waiting for it to show itself."

We are often amused when we hear a proud father talk of his child or an ardent lover of his beloved. We have seen the originals of these glowing descriptions and they do not seem to tally with the word pictures. We cannot imagine how the podgy baby or the dull, plain girl can arouse so much enthusiasm and passion, yet the enthusiasm, the fiery love is there; it is a real thing and has been evoked by something real.

So we have to ask ourselves, who sees the deeper into the reality of that very ordinary-looking girl, the passer-by, or the lover? It is the lover, of course, because he has discovered the hidden jewel that never sparkled nor shone, until he brought it to the light of his love.

Who knows the baby best? Is it the father who takes his turn at pacing up and down the floor with him in the middle of the night trying to soothe his infant wails, or the

neighbor on the other side of the lath and plaster walls cursing and swearing at having his slumber disturbed? It is the father, of course, infinitely patient and tender and appreciative and proud of the queer little yelling morsel of flesh and bone. He knows the secret richness of life that his baby is going to develop one day.

Even so, as God looks upon us he sees the inherent ability, the hidden beauty, the unused power of spirit in each of us.

Do not get out of bed, therefore, until you have set your thought on God. Then remind yourself that he knows you better than anyone else does and sees more wonderful things in you, and is waiting to illumine your spirit each morning as you awake.

God's power set the stars in their courses, restful, reliable, and steadfast. His mind created the grace and sympathy of the larch, the silver birch, and the poplar; his joy set the birds singing; his serenity produced the night sky, and his love understands you better than you understand yourself.

When first thy eyes unveil, give thy soul leave
To do the like; our bodies but forerun
The spirit's duty; true hearts spread and heave
Unto their God as flowers do to the sun.
Give him thy first thoughts; then so shalt thou keep
Him company all day, and in him sleep.

Yet never sleep the sun up; prayer should
Dawn with the day; there are set awful hours
'Twixt heaven and us; the manna was not so good
After sunrising; far day sullies flowers;
Rise to prevent the sun; sleep doth sins glut,
And heaven's gate opens when the world's is shut.

Walk with thy fellow-creatures; note the hush
And whisperings amongst them. Not a spring
Or leaf but hath his morning hymn; each bush
And oak doth know I *am*. Canst thou not sing?
O leave thy cares and follies! Go this way,
And thou art sure to prosper all the day.

Serve God before the world; let him not go
Until thou hast a blessing; then resign
The whole unto him and remember who
Prevail'd by wrestling ere the sun did shine.
Pour oil upon the stones, weep for thy sin,
Then journey on and have an eye to heaven.

Mornings are mysteries: the first world's youth,
Man's resurrection and the future's bud,
Shroud in their births; the crown of life, light, truth
Is styled their star; the store and hidden flood.
Three blessings wait upon them, two of which
Should move, they make us holy, happy, rich.

When the world's up and every swarm abroad,
Keep well thy temper, mix not with each clay:
Despatch necessities; life hath a load
Which must be carried on, and safely may.
Yet keep those cares without thee; let the heart
Be God's alone and choose the better part.

—Henry Vaughan, 1695.

III

THE MORNING PRAYER

CONSIDER yourself not ready to start the day, ill equipped, unprepared to mix with your fellows, until you have spent at least fifteen minutes in prayer. Count it as much a social necessity as washing. Some people spend this pre-breakfast prayer-time in a Church, others in a garden, some by their bedroom window, others walking abroad.

There is something about walking—something in the rhythm of it probably—that conduces to progress in prayer, and the prayer must expect to make progress.

We may find ourselves suffering from spiritual growing-pains and mistaking this unpleasant experience for deterioration, think we are losing ground. But it is growth, not retrogression, that is making us dissatisfied with ourselves, and while, because of our higher standard, we are more conscious of our shortcomings, yet we find ourselves seeing deeper, gaining a wider outlook on life, a clearer understanding of our fellows.

The cultivation of the spirit should be considered with at least as much intelligence as the cultivation of corn. If the field is of good soil and well plowed, if good seed is sown in it, if each day it gets a normal amount of sunshine and rain, if the four winds of heaven blow upon it, good corn inevitably appears. So it is with ourselves. If our mind is prepared and disciplined, if the teaching of Christ is sown in it, if each day it is set toward God and without anxiety and fuss laid open to his influence, good character inevitably appears. "Is it likely," asks Henry Drummond, "that the growth of corn should be

regulated by law and the growth of character by mere caprice?"

An old man was asked by a friend to explain the secret of his serene enjoyment of life, his knack of spreading happiness. At first he demurred, but at length, seeing his friend's eagerness, he confessed to a certain rule kept from his youth up. He had devoted an hour before breakfast each day solely to thanksgiving. He never allowed a thought of worry or a difficulty, a fault or a sin to turn his mind from the simple enjoyment of God's presence, from praising and thanking him for his glorious works. It became a matter of habit with him, just as giving way to worry, a sense of inefficiency, or self-pity becomes a habit with others. That hour of concentration on all that was glorious, beautiful, and satisfying brought him so near to God that the glow of it lasted all day. The law of cause and effect is as reliable in the spiritual as in the physical realm.

There are many who depend on their morning prayer for strength to tackle the difficulties ahead of them, and for wisdom to solve the pressing problems of the day. Yet they would soon cease to think of these difficulties ahead if they habitually linked themselves to God with their waking thought. Our puniness turns into strength as we think of Him, so that even the fact of our being well or ill depends to a large extent on how many seconds out of the twenty-four hours we have God in our minds.

Some people, however, find it good in the morning to let the day's program unfold itself in their minds. What looked large, depressing, and foreboding last night is seen in its true proportion now, as an incident that can be anticipated as almost amusing. Messages, appoint-

ments, purchases, and interviews which seemed of critical importance last night now seem to be totally trivial. The engagement one was dreading so fiercely takes on the aspect of a friendly and natural tête-à-tête.

Self-consciousness—that bane of youth—disappears, as we practice praying. During this pre-breakfast quarter of an hour we become more conscious of God than of our fellows and learn that achievement is worth more than anything else in life. Of course half an hour is much better than a quarter, for during the morning prayer-time new aspirations form themselves in one's mind. A fresh attempt should be made to accomplish a much-desired and long-delayed aim; a new assault ought to be planned against the fastness of evil, allied as it is with hoary vested interests; a different approach by a hitherto untried route must be made to that poor young soul, sick in his own self-pity, secure in his scorn for others.

"Am I ready for such tasks?" Anyhow, I am ready to be made ready, as I wait in quietness for God's help and co-operation.

The day will not be the jewel, the poem, the joy it might be unless one can come to the pitch when one can say the prayer: "Behold me, O Lord, in thy hands ready for all; spin me backward or spin me forward, for I desire nothing other than the doing of thy will, and oh! that I might do it worthily and perfectly!"

"Faith is the conscious co-operation with an unseen force which is ever molding men and things to higher uses." If we want to play our part in this cosmic process, we have to hold ourselves in readiness to do anything at any time and in any circumstances. "I would fain be to the Eternal Goodness what his own right hand is to a

man." God needs one to be perpetually ready to serve, like the Knights of the Grail, or even like Kundry in her sane interludes, ready to go half round the world for a healing herb to give to a sinner in pain.

The willingness to do this, even though we never get further than our own back street, turns grey and black into gold and purple for us. But do not be too sure that your call abroad may not come when you least expect it; when you are in the dullest of moods, beware. Be ready. Do not let yourself become immersed in the humdrum, workaday world. Prepare yourself, offering yourself afresh each day to God to serve at any sudden call, anyhow, anywhere—even on the Cross.

IV

ACTS OF RECOLLECTION

Robert Browning worked out at some length, in his poem *Pippa Passes,* how a single person walking down a street, past a garden, into the country for a day's holiday may affect the destiny of many whom she has never seen. The process of walking down a street, stepping into a crowded lift, a strap-hanging in the Underground, and emerging once more into the upper air, can be either a boring routine or a new adventure, fraught every day with fresh significance.

It is a good habit on entering a room or a train or a bus to practice conscious reverence for the personality of each of those already there. The mystics used to take time to unite themselves with their environment, so that, whatever it was and however unpleasant, it had no power to oppress them.

Our job is just as hard; it is to keep ourselves in harmony with our fellows, even in the crush of an overcrowded tube. We can do it by remembering the Presence of God, looking at our fellow passengers and reminding ourselves that each of them, though perhaps they have no idea of it, is near and dear to God.

As one looks round at the weary, jaded expression on the faces of some of them, one longs to introduce to them the thought of God. This thought is infectious; it can be spread in many a bus and train so that Tagore's words ring true, "Thou hast pressed the signet of eternity upon many a fleeting moment of my life."

The critics of "grace-saying" are right on one point.

It is not only mealtimes that should be associated with acts of prayer and recollection. Each one of us ought to make his own association. Some link up the striking of the hour with the thought of God. Some let the climbing of a staircase, or the washing of hands, be a reminder of him. Like posts that mark a snow-hidden road, these moments of contact with God become invaluable.

One woman, whose life was distinguished by her many friendships, made a practice, whenever she met a stranger or whenever a newcomer entered the room, of saying to herself, "Now I wonder what of God I am going to find in this person?" Another was able to meet many a crisis successfully by her habit of looking at people—prince or beggar alike—not as strangers, however aloof they might hold themselves, but as dear comrades by the silent use of the formula, "The spirit of God within me is going out to meet God's spirit in you."

Sometimes there comes an almost unbroken sense of joy, peace, and harmony with God and our fellow which lasts for several days; we begin to think it is going to last forever; all our conflicts are in abeyance; we are at rest yet full of vigor; everything turns out right for us; there is no worry, no weariness, no hurry; everything happens to suit our needs, we feel that we have actually begun to enjoy eternal life here on earth.

Then comes a clash, a minor crisis, a disappointment, and the current seems insidiously to have changed without our knowing how. One false move, one outburst of ill-temper, or one bitter word spoils the whole thing. We become so disgusted with ourselves at having lost control, that we feel everything is hopeless. Giving way to irritation has robbed us of our self-respect; we do not

stop to reason it out, we do not pray, we just sink lower and lower in a slough of self-disgust until our very power to get free from the enveloping depression seems to have gone. What is the good of trying? Gloom and disillusion rule, and, but for the anchorage of the regular praying habit that holds us, the mood might hasten us, by geometrical progression, into spiritual bankruptcy.

As it is there is no need hopelessly to throw up the sponge; by retracing our steps to the last point of harmony with God, we can make a fresh start.

Brother Lawrence had his own healthy way of meeting this emergency. "When he had failed in his duty he simply confessed his fault, saying to God, 'I shall never do otherwise, if you leave me to myself; 'tis you must hinder my falling, and mend what is amiss.' After this he gave himself no further uneasiness about it." His way works, but only when one is living the prayer life, constantly and consciously turning one's thoughts to God, practicing the presence of God.

An old story is told of two hermits who gave way to an overpowering desire to visit the neighboring city. Its distractions caused them so to forget God that they felt themselves unable to resist its allurements and spent the night in what seemed to them an unparalleled orgy of vice. As, with eyes downcast and thoughts heavy and flat, they turned their listless footsteps toward their accustomed place of solitude, each began to contemplate the situation.

One hermit let his wretched thoughts prey upon him. He almost wallowed in his shame, and every step he took seemed heavier than the last. His gaze seemed to pierce into the ground, it was so leaden and oppressed. His sin

seemed to grow bigger and bigger as he dwelt upon it, also his pride was wounded to discover that he was no better than anyone else. His mind was so concentrated on these thoughts that it never reached God at all. He was quite unaware of the life-giving flood of God's love that understands and forgives, renews and inspires.

For mile after mile he argued within himself, until at last it seemed impossible that he should be rehabilitated in his old position—in his decent, cleanly, simple way of life. He hated his sin, but the shame of it had entangled him so that he could not free himself of the feeling of guilt. Suddenly he halted abruptly, turned to his brother, and, with misery smoldering in his eyes, bade him a curt goodbye and retraced his steps to the city once more.

But the other hermit, thoroughly disgusted at his own folly and weakness, pondered on the emptiness and unsatisfying nature of sin. His penitence being very real, he at length cried, "Father, I have sinned against thee—I am no more worthy to be called thy son. Thou knowest all my heart. Help me for Christ's sake never to forget thee again." In the silence that followed he knew that his prayer was heard, and, feeling strong enough to meet any difficult situation that the future might hold, he stepped out, blithely brusting into song.

There are a good many moderns entangled in sin for the first time who turn their thoughts inward to themselves, to their sin, to surmise of what people would say if they knew, instead of immediately turning to God and letting him heal.

We must be honest enough to accept the fact of our sin and offer the bitter experience we have gained from

it to God. He always enables us to use it for the benefit of our fellows.

The acts of recollection we make during the day ensure a healty habit of mind, a turning of our thoughts outward to God rather than inward to ourselves. Minute fragments of poison, such as a sudden jab of jealousy, a pang of self-pity, a gust of pride, cannot then accumulate to the enfeebling of the whole constitution.

R. H. Benson in his *Richard Raynal* describes how the young man, when assailed by the fiend with fierce temptation and doubt, used to "cry upon Jesus in his heart and then set the puzzle by." This is the way of spiritual health.

V

THE PRAYER OF RELAXATION

(Reprinted by kind permission of the *Guild of Health Review*)

"You'll never be able to take on that job," said an eminent nerve specialist to a friend of mine, an undergraduate, who was training to be a teacher. "The only thing you will ever be able to do is gentle manual work in the open air."

To an intellectual enthusiast this sounded almost like a death sentence. She gave up her regular visits to the great man, sought anxiously another way of life, found her métier in the East End, lived there strenuously, practiced the way of prayer, and was cured.

"You'll never get cured," said a masseuse to men when I had been ill for seven or eight months with an overstrained heart. My doctor's bill was seventy pounds, and the masseuse traveled into the country twice a week in order to pummel me. Whenever I showed signs of progress and was allowed to take my place in normal life again, on his next visit the doctor always found that I had relapsed. One day the masseuse said: "You don't seem able ever to get well. It's your temperament. You enjoy everything too much." The masseuse departed. I lay still, deep in thought. My temperament? I enjoyed everything too much? Surely it was good to have the sort of temperament that enjoyed to the full every experience of life. What a challenge to the foundation of one's faith, to the basis of one's philosophy! Wasn't it God's will that one should enjoy all his gifts to the full?

That night I spent a long time alone, roaming among

the trees, thinking. It was quite difficult to pursue a line of impersonal reasoning, when for months one had been flabby with illness, waited on, necessarily self-centered. It seemed agony to start examining one's foundations, but the masseuse's words had "stabbed my spirit broad awake." For they constituted a challenge to the principle that makes life worth living; that accepts the universe as orderly, harmonious, friendly, joyous. As darkness fell, I continued to wrestle with my problem. It seemed to me that I was crawling about on the floor of hell. But some light dawned before bedtime, and during the next day I evolved a plan, worked out a rule of life, started my spiritual exercises, began to lose my flabbiness, and in a month was back at work, cured.

It took me one hour a day for a month to get the cure. Nothing must interfere with that hour. One tries to evade it, making wonderful excuses as to why it happens to be quite unnecessary today or impossible to fit in among other thronging duties. But it must never be evaded. It is more important than one's dinner. During that hour I had to be alone, uninterruptible, in a corner of the garden or my bedroom. I had been ill a long time. The nerve of my heart had apparently struck work; my breathing was irregular, jerky; my heart would miss a beat and then race along like an engine. If I was interested in a play or a conversation, or in anything, my toes would curl up inside my shoes, my fingers tighten up as though my hand was clenched. If I was reading, my face muscles would become tense. Whenever I was doing anything, I was physically strung up.

Now all these habits had to be tackled, undone; every muscle had to be relaxed and accustomed to the state of

relaxation. This state had to be recognized as one's normal state, God's will for one, peace, placidity, leisureliness. I had been living on my nerves for a year or so without knowing it, due to a series of calamities that had battered upon my family. Do you remember the old phrase used in the push bike era? When the tire went flat, one was said to be "riding on the rims." It was bad for the tires, and it seemed to me that living on one's nerves was like that, making one jagged, ragged. I felt like a piece of overstrung elastic, or a bit of frayed string, or yesterday's lettuce. The elastic cannot regain its resilience, nor the string its firmness, but the lettuce can recover its vigor, if it is plunged into water, because it is alive. And I knew that I could recover my freshness both physically and spiritually as soon as I could become receptive to the all-pervading power of God. So for an hour each day I set myself the definite task of gaining renewal of vitality from God through relaxation.

I stretched myself out on my back, my weight concentrated on the nerve plexus at the back of the waist. Then I relaxed my muscles. This was no easy task, for I certainly had been seriously ill. I loosened my finger muscles and spread out my hand as though it were the model for an artist; made the whole arm relaxed, loosened, so that when it was raised, it fell heavy and inert in whichever direction it was tossed, like a sleeping child's; then the same with the toes and the feet; then the same, a much harder task, with the face muscles. I discovered that when the face muscles are relaxed one automatically smiles, hence the smile on the face of the dead, when the nerves are functioning no longer. Therefore, even a mechanical smile, which in life is an abominable thing, is a necessary

exercise at the beginning of this hour, for it automatically relaxes all the face muscles and rests the nerves. By this time, I would find the hand and finger muscles all taut again, and they had to be again relaxed, then the feet, then the face. It would take perhaps fifteen minutes to get really relaxed all over, then one could begin the cure.

I would listen to my own breathing, noticing it, how regular it had become, and as I listened it became slower. Then, one suddenly realized how tired one was; ever so much more tired than when one had retired, twenty minutes previously, from the mild excitement of family life below stairs. Twenty minutes previously one had been feeling full of energy, utterly tireless, averse from the very thought of rest and seclusion, rebelling against the discipline of the hour of prayer, putting forward to one's self some marvellous new reason, more urgent than any of its daily predecessors, for giving it a miss. That was evidently a self-deception. I had felt energetic and tireless because of my overstimulated, ill-regulated nerves. But now the artificial stimulus was withdrawn and the nerves were recovering their tone. The tiredness was gradually transformed into deep restfulness, until I could say to myself, not in words, but in my mind, "With every breath I draw, I am breathing in the very breath of God." These life-giving exercises I continued indefinitely until my whole being seemed to be enveloped by a great sense of peace and I felt that the prayer of relaxation was like a good, strong raft on which men could ride over the deepest and blackest of waters in perfect safety and delight.

VI

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

"COME," said St. Catherine, when she and her friends were faced with a grave crisis, "let us storm Heaven with our prayers."

The more completely one lives, the more friends one has. They seem to be acquired unconsciously. A stranger begins to talk, on a voyage, on a bus, at a show. The journey ends, the show is completed, but this chance acquaintance has become a friend whose own particular niche in one's life could be filled by no other person. His outlook, his significance, his stimulus is like no one else's. One may never see him again, but his enrichment of one's life is permanent, probably even eternal.

But most of our friends are seen again or talked of, sometimes even heard from, and inevitably they enter our mind when we are at prayer, for their problems elicit our acute interest and in some measure become our own. Many of them definitely ask for prayer, but a long list of names can become a deadening, depressing affair even though each individual name brings lovely memories and comfortable friendly thoughts to our mind.

Then there are those whose needs keep obtruding themselves on our minds just because they seem so unaware that they need anything. They have never seen the vision of perfection, and are in the suffocating throes of pleasurable comfort and an all-pervading sense of satisfaction which was Mr. A. C. Benson's ideal of hell.[1]

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[1] *Child of the Dawn*, by A. C. Benson.

It may be necessary to keep several different periods during the day or during the week for different friends, unless, indeed, you have reached that stage which is the essence of prayer where even thinking about a person links them with God.

It is easy to become stale and bored in praying regularly for people, so let us consider a few specific methods.

There is the habit of Frank Laubach, a missionary who shares the life of the Moslem Moros of the Philippines. Alone and far from home and kindred, he pins up on his study wall photographs of all the people for whom he wants to pray. Every night after supper he goes into the room alone, and leaving the place dark, he lets his electric torch illuminate one portrait among them all. To this person he talks aloud, putting into words his every wish for them. Then when his thoughts have gone as high and as far as they will, he writes to that friend telling what he has done.

There is also the way of intense concentration on the presence of God described by the late R. H. Benson in his sketch, "In the Convent Chapel."[2]

He tells how souls almost dead in trespasses and sins turned in their sleep, disturbed, snarling and sullen, stabbed awake by the power of the poor nun's prayer.

There is the habit of seeing in your mind's eye the person for whom you would pray, and then letting various things happen to him. Is he bored and listless? You see him reinvigorated by salt breezes from the sea. "Breathe on him, breath of God; fill him with life anew," you pray.

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[2] *The Light Invisible,* by R. H. Benson.

Is he weak, suffering, lying in a hospital ward facing some death-dealing disease, or threatened by madness or suicide? The vivid picture that springs to one's mind must at all costs be banished. One cannot get rid of it by negative means, only by positive suggestion of something equally vivid, equally true to life can this be done. Take time to make a new picture of your friend radiantly happy, in perfect health, utterly self-possessed. See him out in the open air on a balmy day of April, new life everywhere, in plant and tree. Life is the essence of God. Is His arm shortened that it cannot save? Is any germ, even the most deadly, more potent than His creative spirit? Can he not renew, reshape our lives?

Again, one may imagine the friend looking up suddenly, seeing Christ, gazing at him amazed, little by little losing his depression, losing his tangled, torturing thoughts, drawing hope and sanity from his presence, strength from his personality, peace from his peace.

Is he narrow, crabbed, congested in his ideas and prejudiced? You see him on the prow of a ship in mid-ocean, unmeasured space in every direction. Can he remain so unaware, so petty, when God is surrounding him with illimitable wisdom?

Is he lacking in confidence, groping, stumbling in the dark forest of his self-conscious awkwardness? Then see him greeting the primrose dawn of a May sunrise, every ray of rosy light, every tender shadow doing its appointed work. He walks with surer tread, the trees are no longer hindrances but friendly, put there by God, who is the lover of all humble, dumb, and simple things.

Is he wrapped up in self-esteem and conceit? Has he a position of consequence? Is he looked up to by his

fellows so that their admiration colors his life falsely? See him as a little boy decked up in all the paraphernalia beloved by a child, a sword to strut about with, a shield to thwack, a trumpet to blow, a helmet to stimulate a higher stature. The little swashbuckler cuts an heroic figure in his own eyes at least as he struts down the street. Suddenly he gets a fright from a bully or a policeman, a fall or a barking dog. He stumbles over his sword, drops his encumbering shield, and runs crying down the street, his helmet all awry, until he finds his mother. She sees no warrior in shining armor, only a poor little snippet of a frightened child. Her comforting arms about him, he soon becomes the normal child once more. The hound of heaven will surely reach every man at last, so that his disguise slips from him and he is as one whom his mother comforteth, a child of God again.

Perhaps your friend is being badly tempted or in danger of choosing the second best. Your prayer for him may fall in with Elijah's tremendous struggle on Mount Carmel, as Mendelsohn described it in music. The oratorio contains prayers that reach so far and high in intercession, that the music carries one along with its power.

Perhaps a hardened, cynical person needs your prayers; some strong thrust of the spirit is needed in order to pierce the crust that has grown up round the impressible part of his mind. In some tough cases when nothing seems to work, humor is one of God's best gifts, one of his most efficient servants. You have seen a child's satisfaction as he focuses a sunbeam with a bit of glass and flashes it into the eyes of some dignified person up at the other end of the room. He blinks and moves his head, but the gleam pursues him whichever way he turns.

If, glum and smug, he chooses a dark corner to evade the impertinence, even there the laughing sunlight flashes into his eyes. So can you follow your quarry with humor, where painstaking endeavor is no longer to be endured.

Sometimes praying may make you physically weary. It may be a wrestling of spirit, a struggle for attainment, an agonizing spiritual contest so acute that you find yourself holding your breath; an assault upon the forces of cruelty, prejudice and callousness so energetic that it tires you out, or a passionate attack on evil in some form threatening a beloved friend or child that seems to reproduce the terrific elements of a cosmic struggle.

In going to the help of a drowning man, the rescuer may become so exhausted that all he can do is to hold up his subject's head until help arrives from some other source. So in the realm of prayer, one has sometimes to hold on to the soul of a friend and, in spite of utter weariness and exhaustion, to refuse to let go.

Wrestling for the life of a patient who was thought to be already halfway through the gates of death, a certain nurse set her teeth and refused to accept defeat. The patient recovered. Afterward the nurse described the crisis.

"You know how on the river the passing of a big motor launch may sometimes so endanger your little boat fastened to the bank that you have to grapple with your boat-hook to avoid being shaken and bumped against the bank. The waves toss your boat violently up and down, but you exert all your strength to keep your grip, while the hook fairly bites into the earth and your wrists ache with holding on. Well, I felt all through the crisis as if I'd got my hook into my patient. I did not let go for

three days. I was tuned up to the struggle, and I won."

So in other crises, when the danger threatening one's friend may be due to spiritual causes, inertia, pride, or despair, one wrestles for him. Duties, pleasures, daily routine continue to claim one's attention, but there in the background of one's mind is the friend "held still and serene" in one's love; that unchanging, unshockable, imperturbable love that will not let him go, that holds him in the presence of God.

Pray for your friends. Continue instant in prayer, in season and out of season. Pray them out of their moods, and their partial, unbalanced lives into the fulness of knowledge of God.

VII

THE EVENING PRAYER

NEVER get into bed with a burdened or a heavy mind; whether it be a vague oppression or a definite fear, shame or remorse, anger or hate, get rid of the evil thing before you lie down to sleep.

Night is a holy time, a healthy time, a time of renewing and refreshment. He giveth to His beloved while they sleep; our unconscious mind, that most faithful servant, is active during our slumber. Settle down restfully to let your mind get clear and your spirit unclogged. It would be better to sit up half the night, wrestling in spirit until you have won your way to peace and wholeness rather than embark upon hours of unconsciousness with an unresolved conflict, an unacknowledged fear, or an unforgiven friend in your mind.

Throughout the whole day your stream of consciousness has been flowing in many directions. You have been seeing, hearing, feeling, remembering, noticing things all day long, and each experience has made its due impression on you. Most of the impressions have fitted themselves quite naturally into the general design of your everyday life. Some were new, but soon found their correct position in the general framework or background that each individual creates for himself in life.

But some impressions stood out, could not be placed, rebelled against order. That gust of unreasoning anger, for instance, that suddenly swept over you; that incomprehensible fear you first glimpsed in the eyes of a friend and then experienced yourself; that new line of thought that threatened, if pursued, to upset one of your most

cherished convictions; that bitter criticism of yourself that you heard in such a disconcerting manner from the lips of a neighbor; these all come crowding into your mind. They collect in an inextricable tangle, as soon as your work is over, as soon as your attention is freed from routine duties, as soon as you have leisure and are alone—and that is probably not until bedtime. Very well! Welcome them all, meet them cheerily; they only become obstreperous and unruly if one dismisses them rudely, turning the cold shoulder to them. It is a folly ever to shirk the issue of a single, worrying, doubting thought. Face each one before you get into bed, face them in the presence of your Father who knows all your muddled feelings and understands your tempestuous passions.

It does not take long, this process, but it forms one of the most important parts of your evening prayer. Silent in God's presence, you can relax yourself completely. Rely on him as on a Father. The restfulness of being alone at last, facing reality, may even make you laugh aloud for joy as you open your mind in perfect confidence and summon the whole bustling medley of burdensome thoughts before Him. One can almost stand back, as it were, and survey them bursting out of one's mind—these rampageous, weakening, strange, and startling thoughts! Let them come, waiting quietly for each, without a shadow of dread. See how they show up in the deep calm of God's presence. "That anger I felt this morning, it was like murder, it did real harm to the person it was vented upon, others are re-acting to it still; it was anti-social, a sin. God forgive me. It is not remission of penalty I am asking for when I say 'forgive.' It is a longing to be made whole again, a passionate desire

to save my victim from the consequences of my anger, a willingness to do anything to make amends. Anger is a force and I have let it loose upon the world; it may have wrecked the happiness of several people today. Father! have mercy on me, sinner, weakling, fool that I am! Let Christ's love undo the harm I have done. Let his love save and redeem my victim."

One may wait a few moments before the next impression comes to the fore. That new line of thought: it seemed dangerous, but there was no time to explore it. Now, you can welcome it, pursue it with far greater clarity because of the presence of God, the Master-Mind. No thought can be alien to him. He is always pushing his people out into further regions of thought. With every fresh discovery mankind discovers a little more of God. Patiently seek the truth. Certainly one of your most cherished convictions may be threatened if this new line of thought is true, but why have you been cherishing this conviction? This new idea may lead to something nobler; it looks promising. You must continue to observe its course. You must talk it out with wise friends. You can go no further just now, alone.

As one waits quietly, other thoughts of fear or anxiety come to the forefront and are faced in the same way. Most of them disappear, vanish incontinently in the presence of God.

One is at peace now with the world, with one's self, and with God. One is ready for bed. If bed means a mattress on a balcony, in a garden, or on a flat roof under the stars, so much the better. Then, as drowsiness increases, the words of committal can be used. "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

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